

Too much mercury flowing

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Lake Erie most likely won't see any less mercury in its waters and that's worrying some local environmentalists.

Area wastewater treatment plants are applying for a variance to a federal regulation, which would allow

Wastewater treatment plants seek variance allowing discharge exceeding federal limits

them to discharge mercury that exceeds federal limits.

In 1995's Great Lakes Initiative — a regional effort to reduce the amount of toxins, such as mercury, to restore the health of the Great Lakes — a limit was set to 1.3 parts per trillion of discharging mercury into the waters.

A part per trillion is equal to one drop of water in 20 Olympic-sized swimming pools.

The wastewater treatment plants in Ohio were allowed to exceed the water quality criteria because of a mixing zone that dilutes concentration of toxic pollutants until Novem-

ber 2010, according to a 2005 report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office. Those releasing mercury within the mixing zones could do up to 14 parts per trillion.

But now, the plants can no longer use mixing zones to justify higher levels of mercury being released and

have to meet a direct discharge of the 1.3 per parts trillion allowed, said Ohio EPA spokesman Mike Settles.

With the stricter guidelines, the wastewater treatment plants would have difficulty meeting the restrictions based on technology.

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"To achieve the 1.3 parts per trillion limit, the cities would have to install extremely costly technology that would result in substantial economic impacts," Settles said.

More than 70 wastewater treatment plants — including Madison Wastewater Treatment Facility and the Gary L. Kron Water Reclamation Facility in Mentor — have been approved to continue discharging mercury in Lake Erie at levels that exceed the limit required in their existing five-year permits.

Nineteen other plants, including the Euclid Wastewater Treatment Plant, are waiting to gain EPA approval.

The treatment plants had to submit a program that identifies how they will reduce mercury and other pollutant levels.

The flow of mercury in the treatment plants is from local industries, including dental offices.

Euclid Treatment Plant Superintendent John Hall said it has plans to survey customers that potentially use the metal.

He said he's preparing to contact 125 businesses in the area about their mercury disposal.

"Education is the best way to get the levels down lower," Hall said. "It's far more cost effective than (the mercury) going through the treatment plant."

He said the plant has been averaging 6.5 parts per trillion and removes 93 percent of the mercury from the incoming water.

Chris Trepal, executive director of Ohio Earth Day Coalition in Cleveland, said the wastewater treatment plants had 15 years to comply with the regulations. Trepal said customer surveys should have been done in the past decade.

"Lake Erie is the only thing we have and it's our biggest asset," she said.

"A small amount (of mercury) can have tremendous health impacts."

Mercury poses a greater risk to babies and younger children. The Ohio Department of Health advises that all persons limit consumption of sport fish caught from all waters in Ohio to one meal per week, unless there is a more restrictive advisory, according to the Ohio Earth Day Coalition.

Trepal said variance procedures, with no end in sight, aren't good for the people or fish.

"Our organization testified in opposition to granting the variances," she said. "We can't look at this as too expensive. We need to figure out how to ramp down (the levels) and work toward a goal of meeting the water quality criteria."